BRUCE COVILLE

After the Third Kiss

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by

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I looked at my brother with desperate longing. “Please,” I begged. “Just one more kisssss.”

Wynde shuddered and turned away, toward the west, and the setting sun.

Horrified that I might lose my chance, I stretched the great length of my neck past his broad shoulder, then curved it back so I could catch and hold him with my amber eye. “Please, Wynde,” I hissed again. “Once the sun goesss down, I will be trapped this way forever. We have but minutessss left.”

My heart was pounding with such fear that I thought I might die before the sun reached the horizon anyway. Wynde had kissed me twice already, which, really, was more than you could ask of any man, given how hideous I was, and how fierce the heat of my every breath. But underneath the scales, beyond the fangs, the fire, and the venom, I was still May Margret, the sister he had left behind shortly after our mother’s death, when he went out to conquer the world with his young man’s sword and his young man’s heart. Still the sister who had been left to deal with our father’s new wife, who was the one who had cursed me into this loathsome shape.

The agony of my transformation will be with me always. It pained my body, of course, for every bone had screamed in rebellion at the way it was forced to twist and stretch, every inch of skin had felt afire, every secret inside part burned as though it were being bathed in acid. But the torment of my body had been nothing to the agony of my soul when I saw the long, twisting coils of dragon shape that now encased me.

That same despair pierced me yet again an hour later, when the sight of me evoked piercing screams from Glenna, my lady in waiting—and yet again each time I saw the fear and disgust that twisted the face of anyone who looked on me.

And that was only the beginning, for less than a day after my change I discovered that I had an appetite to match my size, and a hunger that ate at me as if a fire were burning within. Out I soared on newfound wings, and nothing that lived was safe, though I managed to restrict my feeding, usually, to sheep and cattle.

How I was feared. How I was hated! How I ached inside each day as I wrapped myself around the Spindlestone, the great shaft of rock on the cliffs above the sea, the rock that I had claimed as my perch. Or perhaps it had claimed me, for I felt a strange attraction to it. From here I could watch

inland to see if any came to attack. More importantly, I could gaze out over the western waters in the hope that I might spot my brother returning to free me from my curse. For my stepmother had made this much clear: The only way for me to regain my true shape was for Childe Wynde, of his own free will, to kiss me three times before sunset on the day of his return.

Wynde did return, at last. Later I learned that it was my own rampaging hunger that had brought him back, for when I had slain enough cattle, devoured enough sheep, word reached him across the sea that a dragon was devastating his homeland. So home he came, sword at the ready, never suspecting that the beast he came to slay was his own childhood playfellow, the younger sister he had promised to protect and defend forever.

Oddly, by the time he arrived the worst of my depredations were past. This was because an old wisewoman named Nell had advised the desperate country folk that if they would set aside the milk of seven cows to bring me both morning and evening, my ravenous hunger would be sated. So it was a fairly peaceful countryside to which Wynde was returning—at least, until the queen herself became aware that he was on his way. Then her wrath was mighty indeed. I sensed her rage. Indeed, who in the kingdom did not? It seemed to sizzle in the stones, and curl the leaves of every tree. What I did not know, at first, was the cause of it. So I simply clung to my stony perch and watched.

In time I saw a ship upon the horizon. I reared my head, feeling an odd uneasiness. It was as if I needed to go down to the water, to keep the ship from landing; as if there were a compulsion on me to guard the kingdom.

Before the urge became so strong that I must leave my stony perch, my stepmother sent an army of imps to raise a storm and turn the ship away. But my good brother was wiser than the queen had anticipated. Suspecting witchery, Wynde had—as I later learned—sheathed his ship with rowan wood, good proof against the queen's dark art.

It both delighted and troubled me to watch that screeching horde of imps dash themselves against the ship's hull then tumble into the water, where they thrashed about, wailing for their mistress to protect them. Delighted me because they were my stepmother's servants, and I hated her. Troubled me because I had no idea, yet, who was on that ship, and this uncertainty intensified my compulsion to protect our shores. With the imps vanquished, the uneasiness I had felt when I first spotted the ship now drove me to the water's edge. Once there, I found I had no choice but to

attack the ship. Soaring out across the water, I coiled my long body around the vessel and tried to drag it under.

My brain was on fire then. I had no control of myself, and still no knowledge of who was on board. But with the help of the rowan wood Childe Wynde escaped my clutches and steered the ship out of sight. His oarsmen were strong, and before the queen knew what was what, he had landed in the next bay.

And here was a lovely thing; the moment my brother, the true heir to the crown of Arlesboro Castle, set foot on shore, the queen's awesome power was broken. So when Wynde approached me, sword drawn, ready to lop off my head, I was able to speak to him. My own maiden's voice rising from my massive dragon chest, I whisper-hissed, "Ssset down your ssssword, my brother ssssweet, and think not to ssslay me now. For I am your sssister, your May Margret, and naught but your kissss can set me free."

Wynde stared at me in astonishment, and called me both demon and liar. But when I whispered to him of secrets from our past, childish intimacies that only he and I could know, he understood that I spoke the truth.

"What must I do to break this spell?" my winsome brother asked.

"Kissss me thrice ere set of sun, and I'll your sssister be."

Wynde paled, nor could I blame him. I knew too well, from gazing into streams and ponds, how hideous I was, with teeth like daggers, shield-like scales of fiery red, and blazing eyes set in a head the size of a coracle. Yet far worse than all this was the heat of my breath, for though I tried to hold it in, it seared my brother's skin as he drew near. He, brave brother, ignored the pain and kissed me on the lips, his mouth as small to mine as a gnat's would be to his.

Nothing happened, save the blistering of his fair skin.

Again I begged, and again he kissed. Now the blisters multiplied, and this time he cried out with the pain.

The sun was sinking, and with it my hopes. Wynde turned to me once more, and I nearly screamed at the sight of his seared skin. Only the knowledge that such a burst of breath from my lungs would wound him even worse gave me the strength to withhold my cry of pity.

"Please, brother," I whispered, one last time.

Skin blackening, hair smoking, weeping with pain, Wynde leaned in and kissed me a third time. And now the pain was mine, for bones and skin did

in reverse what they had done before, twisting and shrinking as I turned back, back, back to the maiden I once was.

In but moments I stood naked before my blistered brother, who wrapped his cloak around me, then swept me into his arms and carried me to the castle.

But it was not yet time to rest, or heal, for there was one more task to accomplish, and this Wynde did with ease and grace, despite the pain of his burns. Taking a wand of rowan wood, he mounted the tower stairs to where our stepmother, knowing her doom was upon her, sat waiting. It took no spell, no conjuration, for Wynde to work his will. He merely struck her once with the wand. I was holding his hand when he did so, and felt an odd pull, as if something—the transformative magic, I later learned—was leaving me.

Our stepmother's eyes widened. She cried out once, then began her own metamorphosis. Mouth widening, eyes bulging, skin erupting with warts, she shriveled down, down, down, till she was the largest and most loathsome toad I had ever seen.

I wanted to drop a heavy book upon her, but Wynde stayed my hand—I am glad now that he did—and she fled, hopping away down the tower stairs.

And that should have been the end of it.

Save for one thing.

I began to miss the fire inside me.

It did not happen right away, might not have happened at all, had Wynde not stayed and claimed the throne. But not long after my return our aged and ailing father learned the truth of my enchantment, despite our attempts to hide it from him. Realizing at last what a horror he had married, he went half-mad from brooding on what his bride had done to his daughter.

It hurt Wynde and me deeply to see this man, who in our youth had fought and won such a ferocious war with the neighboring kingdom, slump and grow weak. Despite our attempts to rouse him, in a month he took to his bed. A few days later he gave up the ghost.

Wynde—no longer "Childe" Wynde, now that Father was dead—set aside his plans to roam the world. As was both his right and his duty, he claimed the crown.

I was happy at this, and at first there was nothing but loving amity between us, as well there might have been, for we had been dear

companions from earliest childhood. Yet one sad thing did stand between us: his beautiful face never did heal properly, and there remained always afterward deep scars from the terrible burns. He never, not once, spoke of this or in any way blamed me for them. But I flinched each time I saw his face. This was not because the scars made him ugly to me, but because I knew it was I who had put them there.

To make matters worse, I myself was considered more beautiful than ever. Many were the comments on my sparkling eyes, my rosy complexion, and the deep red of my long, shimmering tresses. I alone knew that these were but outward signs of the new energy and vitality I felt within—an unexpected gift from my endragonment.

I used this beauty and energy to regain the trust of the castle servants. Glenna, my lady-in-waiting, was first to lose her fear. Soon enough, she brought the others along.

After a year of wise and fruitful reign, all the kingdom hoped that Wynde would wed, and no neighboring princesses there were, I think, who would have refused his hand, despite his scars, for he was kind and courteous, and, really, still quite beautiful, at least to my eyes. But women know things about what moves the heart to love that men do not, and my poor brother, thinking himself restricted from the paths of love by his ravaged face, never understood what he could have had.

Women know, too, what goes on backstairs, and the rumor was that though Wynde tried many times, he could not get a woman with child. The dragon's breath, it was said, had unmanned him.

These rumors—I did hear them, of course, though Glenna tried to keep them from me—were like daggers in my heart.

Wifeless, childless, Wynde turned his attention on me. Oh, not in any wrongful way! He simply decided that if he was not to wed, I must do so in his place, in order that the kingdom might have a true heir. But all men knew my history, and none there were who dared to call me bride, for fear that I might again become what I once was. None would state this outright, of course, for fear of Wynde's wrath. Even so, I understood well enough the reason I had no suitors.

In his frustration, Wynde, my brother and rescuer, slowly became my tormentor. I don't think he ever really understood what he was doing, or at least not why. But he began to criticize me daily, telling me the ways in which I should change so I might better attract a husband.

I, who had run the household from the time our real mother died! I, who had kept the keys of the castle for our father until the arrival of our stepmother! I, who had a fire in me that no man could understand—a fire, I feared, that none could *withstand*, come the wedding night.

#

It started slowly, this desire of mine. At first it came only at night, when I would lie abed but in my dreams be soaring once again above the countryside, my wings spread wide and all of heaven, fiery with its myriad of stars, stretching endlessly black above me. In these dreams I flew until the moon was in my reach, then swooped to devour once again the sheep and the kine, feeling the crunch of their bones and the hot spurt of their blood as it poured down my gullet. When I woke, I would find myself tangled in sweat-soaked sheets, hardly knowing whether it had been dream or reality.

This went on for some months, always worse at my own time of month. According to Glenna, I grew more restless and irritable by the day.

Though Wynde and I fought over many matters, the situation came to a head the morning he sat down to breakfast and said, “I have found a husband for you at last, May Margret. You will marry Lord Dunbar come spring.”

“Brother,” I said, fighting down the heat I felt rising inside, “I have no need of husband, and you no right to offer my hand.”

“As your king and kinsman, I do indeed have a right to bestow you where I will,” he replied, his voice cold.

“I deny this right of yours!”

Wynde’s voice began to shake. “The kingdom has need of an heir, May Margret. As it will not come from me, it must be you who provides the next in line.”

I could hear in his words, and his tone, the guilt and shame he felt that he was not able to produce an heir himself. It silenced me for a moment, and my heart ached for him. At least, it did until he made his next argument: “Do you forget, dear sister, whom it was who freed you from your dragon prison?”

My rage on hearing this was such that I could scarcely breathe. I could not believe he would use that as a weapon against me! A wave of hot anger

erupting in my heart, I leapt to my feet and flung the chalice I had been clutching at his head.

What happened after that, I do not remember, for I lost consciousness. I do not think it was any womanly weakness that made me faint, but rather the heat in my blood, which came on too fast, too strong.

Once you have been a dragon, it is hard, I discovered, to be mere maiden once again.

#

The next weeks were difficult, as Wynde and I fought over and over again on the matter of the betrothal. I reminded him of how we had hated Dunbar when we were children and he had visited in company with his father. We had both thought him stupid, nasty, and spoiled.

It made no difference to Wynde. As the days went on I raged and cajoled, begged, bartered, and battered at him. One thing only I did not, could not, would not do, and that was weep to get my way.

Despite my entreaties, my brother remained as hard and unmoving as the Spindlestone itself.

During this month I was trying, desperately, to keep the dragondesire at bay. But each time I grew angry—and I was angry often, with every flare of temper seeming greater than the last—the desire would rise again, stronger and deeper than before. Finally I did the only thing I could think to do: I went to visit Nell, the old wise woman who had told the country folk how to soothe my hunger with the daily offerings of milk.

I waited until nightfall, and wrapped myself in a peasant's cloak that I had asked Glenna to bring me. I dearly wanted to have her join me on the trip, but the question I needed to ask was not one I could share with her, or with anyone save Old Nell.

So I went on my own.

In the past, this journey would have frightened me. However I had discovered that, having once been a dragon, I was considerably more bold than I used to be.

Old Nell lived in a low, moss-covered cottage at the edge of the king's wood. She was stooped and withered, and had but one eye. Despite this, she saw me well enough, knowing at once not just who I was, but what I had been.

“Welcome, May Margret,” she said, in a voice that creaked from too little use. “I wondered if you might someday come to visit.”

I realized, with considerable shame, that I should have come well before this, to thank her for the wisdom she had given the country folk, the wisdom that had helped them ease my appetite. Blushing, I said, “I have been neglectful, and dishonor my house and rank by having waited this long to see you.”

Closing her one good eye, Nell replied softly, “Nor did you come now to thank me, I think.”

Blushing yet more fiercely, I said, “No, good woman. I come seeking more wisdom.”

“And prepared to pay?” she asked, her eye now open and alight with greed.

“Of course,” I said, for I was not a total fool, despite my foolishness in not having come to see her sooner. I had brought a silver cup, which I had taken from my trousseau—easy enough to do, since my hopes now lay in a direction far different than marriage.

When I unwrapped the cup, she sighed happily. “Come in then,” she croaked. “Come in and sit by my fire.”

The cottage was small and dark, and she shared it with a cat, also small and dark. Dried herbs hung from the rafters. More of the same were spread across the single small table. Their faint odor spiced the air, making the cottage smell more pleasant than I would have expected.

Nell moved awkwardly to the hearth. Though I tried not to stare, she saw that I noticed her limp. “Wood,” she said ruefully, knocking on her right leg. Then she offered me a stool. She took another for herself and we sat, she unapologetic for the simplicity of the setting, me embarrassed for having been caught staring.

We remained in awkward silence as I struggled to find a way to begin. As it turned out, it was Nell who spoke first. Looking up at me with that one piercing eye, she said, “There’s a fire in your blood, en’t there, lady?”

I started, amazed that she knew what I was feeling. “How did you guess?”

The old woman made a rude sound. “No guessin’ involved, dearie. I was afeered this might happen. You can’t be dragon long without it doin’ somethin’ to you, and *you* were dragon longer than was good. You may

wear a human skin now, but your blood—your blood is different than it was."

"What should I do about it?"

She rose from her chair, and despite the fact that the movement clearly pained her, she seemed suddenly taller and more powerful. "Don't play games with me, lass! That's not the question you came to ask Old Nell, is it?"

I drew back, startled, and a little frightened.

She glared at me with that single eye. "Well, is it?"

I shook my head, and lowered my own eyes, unable to meet her fierce look.

"All right, let's start again, knowing that these things are easier when you're honest about them. What did you come for?"

I hesitated, wanting to be sure before I spoke the words. But I knew what had driven me here, knew what I felt I must do.

"I think… I think I want to become a dragon again," I whispered.

"Well," she replied, with some satisfaction. "Now we're getting somewhere. But are you sure, girl? 'Think' is not good enough. This time there'll be no turning back. Dragon now, dragon forever."

Again I felt the fool. My desire had become so overwhelming that I had not really considered the matter of whether I might ever want to turn human again.

Nell read my confusion easily enough. "Go home and think some more, May Margret. If you feel the same in a month's time, come back and we'll talk again."

I placed the silver cup on the floor beside my stool. Nell nodded approvingly, then tipped her head and said, "One more favor, lass. Could you send some butter and flour from the castle pantry? It would be much appreciated."

"Of course," I said.

She smiled. "And let that boy, William, be the one to carry them here."

"William?" I asked.

"A sweet-faced lad, and a boon to my old eye," she said. Then she cackled in a way that made my skin crawl and pushed me out the door.

#

The next day I sought out William. I knew who he was, of course; he had come to work for us after his father, Lord MacRae, had fallen from grace and lost his lands during the war. He was indeed a handsome lad, and always seemed grateful for our family's generosity. I hoped I wasn't sending him into an untoward situation by asking him to take the flour and butter to Old Nell. But he seemed happy enough with the task, so I did not worry about it further.

I had plenty of other matters to fret me.

I longed to speak to Wynde of what was on my mind, but dared not, for I knew he could not understand. And the sight of his scars, each time I glanced sideways at him, made me feel a traitor for even thinking of returning to the skin from which he had freed me. But at the same time the dreams grew stronger and more vivid, and the desire rose inside me like a flame. Now I woke from dreams of flying to find myself not tangled in sweat-soaked sheets, but standing at the castle parapet, as if I were about to fling myself into the sky.

Except, of course, I had no wings. I began to wonder if I would make it through the days that Nell had asked me to wait without dashing myself against the rocks at the base of the seaward wall.

Wynde noticed my unease and distraction, of course. How could he not? But no matter how he pressed, I could not bring myself to speak to him of what was on my mind. So this became one more barrier between us, separating me from the person who had been dearest to me for most of my life.

To make things worse, the wedding preparations had begun. I did not think I could go through with the marriage, and returning to dragon shape seemed my best escape.

And that should have been the end of it. I had made a choice.

At least, I thought I had. But then Lord Dunbar arrived for a visit, and I found that he was no longer the obstreperous child I remembered, but had become a handsome man, with flaxen hair and wide blue eyes, set in a face as fair as any I had ever seen, save that of Wynde himself before I had scarred him.

Even worse, he was charming. During the week of his visit he teased and joked with me, seeming unconcerned by my strange past. By the time he stole a farewell kiss—a kiss, I will confess, that I freely returned—I found I desired him with a fierceness that startled me, though I suppose it

should not have, given how all my desires had been magnified since my time as a dragon.

There was, indeed, a fire in my blood.

Alas, Dunbar was not my only desire, and deep confusion was raging in my soul. So when the month was over, I returned to Old Nell's cottage, not so much because I was certain of what I wanted to do as because it was to Nell alone that I could confess my competing desires.

"I wasn't sure I would see you again," said the hag when she opened the door to me. Pulling back the long strands of grey hair that dangled about her face, she stared at me for a moment with that one piercing eye, then added, "I sense you are not sure, either—not sure of which way your heart is pointing. Ah, well, lass. Come in and we'll talk a bit."

When we were seated by her fire again, she said, "I can brew for you a potion that will return you to your dragon form. It will stay potent for a goodly time, so you will not need to make your choice right away." With a shrug, she added, "Who knows—maybe simply having it will settle your heart."

"Yes," I said eagerly. "Please do this for me."

She looked away for a moment, then said apologetically, "I have nearly everything I need…"

"*Nearly* everything?" I prompted.

She sighed. "There is one last thing you will have to fetch for me yourself."

"What is it?" I asked, feeling a tingle of fear simply because of the tone in her voice when she said it.

Nell twisted her hands together, then said apologetically, "As it was your stepmother who cast the spell to begin with, I must have something from her to brew this new one."

"I believe some of her clothing remains in the tower room that she had made her own," I said, feeling a bit of relief.

She shook her head. "You misunderstand me, May Margret. I need something from *her."*

It took longer than it should have for me to realize what the old woman meant, for I had thought of our stepmother as being dead, though of course she was not. "But she's a *toad!*" I blurted, when I finally did make out her meaning.

“I had caught word of that,” said Nell dryly. “That doesn’t change the fact that I need something of hers in order to complete the brew. Do you know where she is?”

“How could I know that? She hopped away after Wynde struck her with the rowan wand, and has not been seen since.”

“Well, if you want this change you’ll have to find her.”

“If I do, what is it that I must seek of her?”

Nell smiled, displaying two or three teeth. “Any part of her would do. Of course, she is unlikely to willingly surrender a foot, or even a toe. You could try bargaining, but I’m not sure what you could offer that would convince her to make such a trade.”

My despair must have shown on my face, for Nell laughed. “Fortunately for you, my dear, I need not even so much as a toe. If you can but run a cloth over her back it will suffice. From that I can draw enough of her essence to brew what you need.” She paused, then said, “One more thing.”

“Yes?”

“Be careful not to touch her yourself. To do so will muddle the magic.”

#

I wandered back to Arlesboro Castle, feeling lonely and lost. It seemed impossible to do as Nell had asked, since I had no idea where the queen had gone. However I did have one hope, and that was the castle servants. I knew them well enough to know that gossip was their gold, as important to them as their daily bread. If word of where the queen might be hiding was to be had, it was among them that it would be found. So the next evening, when the day’s work was done and the castle was quieting, I sat in the kitchen with Cook and her helpers.

For some time I simply listened, waiting for a way to bring up my question without seeming too anxious for an answer. At first their talk was all of local doings, what maid had been caught with what lad doing what she ought not, and other such matters. But finally one of them—a girl named Hannah, who had been a playmate when we were younger—spoke about something that had happened, “back when the lady was a dragon.” She caught herself, and an embarrassed silence fell over the group. But I simply laughed and said, “That was months ago, Hannah. Though what you say does bring to mind something I’ve been wondering about.”

“What is that, lady?” asked Hannah, clearly relieved not to have offended.

“I often ask myself where the old queen went after Wynde be-toaded her.”

Suddenly the silence was deeper than before, and furtive looks were exchanged among the women.

“Oh, come,” I said, trying to keep my voice light. “It’s clear you know. Where is she?”

It was Cook who finally answered. “She haunts the lower depths of the castle, lady. Everyone knows that.”

I did not sleep well that night. I felt a tightness in my heart to think my stepmother had been so near to us all this time.

#

As it turned out, the toad queen was not quite so near as Cook thought, something I discovered the night I finally found the courage to go belowground and seek her.

To prepare for my journey, I first made four rushlight torches—one to carry as I started, three to bind at my side for later use. Uncertain of what powers the queen might still possess, I took also a wand of rowan wood. More, I girded myself about with a wide belt I wove from slender rowan twigs. This I wore beneath my kirtle, so that my stepmother would not see it.

I waited till all were asleep, then slipped down to the kitchen, from which there was passage to the lower levels. I went first through the cellars where we stored our ale, and the root vegetables, and the barrels of salted meat. Below those cellars lay the dungeon. This, I suspected, was where the toad queen lurked.

The stone stairs to the dungeon were wet, as slick as if covered with dew. The wall—not brick, but carved from the living rock—was cool and moist to my touch. I heard no sound save the crackle of my rush torch, for I walked in silence, as I had been able to do ever since my time as a dragon.

When I reached the dungeon a shiver rippled over my flesh. The flickering light of my torch revealed the chains that hung from the walls; the horrid implements of pain, carefully arrayed in a rotting wooden rack;

the dark ashes of a long dead fire where iron was once heated until it was red hot.

The sight of these things stirred in me an uneasy memory, a memory of an afternoon when I was no more than ten and Wynde and I had crept down these very stairs, each prodding the other on by dares and bets. As we descended we heard someone sobbing, a sound so filled with pain that I wanted to turn back. But Wynde would not go and—unwilling to give him cause to call me coward—I stayed at his side until, together, we peered around the wall at bottom of the stairs. In that moment we saw something so horrifying that we both turned and fled.

We never spoke of it afterward.

It was odd to think of such torture being inflicted in the daytime. It seemed it should be a secret, nighttime activity. But in the eternal darkness beneath the castle, I guess, night and day were as one. And it was all too easy now—especially in the weirdly dancing shadows cast by my torch—to imagine anew the screams of the suspected spies and traitors who had been sent here during the days of the war.

Too easy to imagine that their shades still lurked in the darkened corners, waiting to reach out for me.

Yet it was those very corners I must explore, if I were to find the queen.

The smell of fungus and wet stone and something worse, something foul, filling my nostrils, I began my search. To my dismay, an hour of looking yielded no sign of the toad queen. What I did finally find was another door. I was about to open it when my torch began to gutter. I took the second from my waist and quickly used the last sparks of the one I held to light it. When it was safely ablaze I opened the door. It seemed a foolish thing to do—surely the toad queen could not have managed this door. Yet I had searched every inch of the dungeon.

Perhaps someone opened it for her, I thought with a shudder. I wanted to turn back, a want like a hunger. But another part of me, stronger even, was caught by my obsession.

Wondering how deep the world beneath the castle went, I passed through the door to a narrow, winding stair. Its curve was so tight that I could see but a few feet ahead of me, and the moisture on the stone steps was so treacherous—I slipped more than once—that it slowed my pace.

After what seemed like several minutes my second torch began to flicker.

“Not now!” I whispered fiercely, shaking it.

The flame strengthened, but not by much. I scowled. Surely this torch had not lasted as long as the first.

Reminding myself that I had spent a great deal of time searching the dungeon and would need but moments to pass through it on my return trip, I lit the third torch and continued my journey.

When the stairs came, at last, to an end I found myself standing at the edge of some water, though whether a tiny pond or a vast lake I had no way of telling, for my light did not reach far enough.

Raising my torch, I saw that the stony ledge on which I stood was, perhaps, five feet wide, and that the water extended in both directions. I walked first to my right, but soon came to a place where the water and the side of the cavern came together. Turning, I walked the other way. As I passed the entry to the stairwell I realized it might be easy to miss coming back, so I slipped out of my shoes, leaving them on the floor as a marker.

When I had gone another thirty paces, the stone cold and wet beneath my bare feet, I came to a small boat. Who had brought it here, and from where? Should I use it to cross the water? I walked on, but soon came to another place where wall and water converged. Turning back, I climbed into the boat. Praying that my torch would last, telling myself I could always make the last part of the return trip in the dark, I thrust the base of the torch between two strips of wood at the front of the boat, and began to row. Wynde and I had pottered about often enough on the nearby loch when we were young that I had some skill with oars, though my mother had been scandalized when she discovered it.

After only a few strokes I could no longer see the strand of rock from which I had departed. I turned to look over my shoulder.

The void ahead of me seemed to have no end.

Every ounce of common sense I had left was shrieking for me to turn the boat around. But I was in the grip of a passion; turning back was simply not possible. On I rowed. My torch continued to burn steady, which was both a relief and a bit frightening, for I knew my final torch might not last as long.

Just as I was wondering if I should yield to the small voice inside that was begging me to turn back I glanced over my shoulder again and saw a light not far ahead. Despite my aching arms, I redoubled my efforts, pulling strongly across the black water. The distance was hard to gauge, for in that

great, oppressive darkness even a small bit of light stretched a fair ways. I rowed farther than I had expected, growing ever more fearful of finding my way, yet too close now to turn away. I glanced constantly over my shoulder, and at last saw that I was close to my goal. A moment later my oars struck a rocky bottom; a moment after that I felt the scrape of the little boat's keel against the stone.

In that instant, my torch went out.

I could have lit the last, I think; there was spark enough to make it go. But I decided to take the chance that I would be able to light it from whatever provided the glow that had drawn me on. Perhaps better, I told myself, to proceed in darkness. No need to draw attention to my presence until necessary.

I drew in the oars, then hiked up my robe and slipped from the boat into the cold, shallow water. Cautiously, silently, I drew the boat onto the shore. Some ten feet ahead I saw an opening in a rocky wall. From this opening came the glow that had drawn me the last of the way across the water.

I approached with dragon silence, pressed myself to the wall, peered around, and breathed a sigh of relief. I had found the queen!

A brown and bloated toad as large as my head, my stepmother crouched upon a flat stone about three feet high. Around her—some standing, some lounging on the floor, still more squatting in niches in the wall—was a group of small, humanlike creatures who stood no taller than the stone on which the toad queen sat. Their skin—they were all naked—was a pallid grey, their eyes huge, their hands and feet oddly elongated.

The light that had drawn me came from a small fire burning in a pit carved in the floor.

I backed away, my courage wavering. But one of the imps had spotted me. It cried out, and several of the creatures rushed through the opening. Seizing me, they dragged me before their queen. I thought of beating at them with my rowan wand, which was hidden in my sleeve, to drive them off, but I did not want my stepmother to know I had it. So I did not resist.

The imps dropped me in front of the stone pillar where the toad queen crouched. When I had gained my feet again, she said, "Well, this is an unexpected pleasure. Did you miss your loving stepmother, May Margret?"

Then her broad face split in a grin that made it even more horrible

"Oh, yes," I replied. "I've longed for you every day since you left."

Her smile vanished. “Do not be rude, May Margret! Why have you come here? Is it not enough that you and your wretched brother have trapped me in this disgusting shape—”

“No more disgusting than the one in which you imprisoned me,” I snapped, interrupting her.

“Ah,” she said softly. “That was different.”

To my amazement, she sounded as if she really believed what she was saying.

“You—you and your beauty—were a threat to my rule.” Before I could protest, she said, “Come, come, May Margret. You cannot deny it. Men are such fools, after all. And I did need to rule, for your father was ineffective.”

“Don’t say that!” I cried, even as I realized in my heart that it was true.

“Tut, May Margret, you know I speak truth. You cannot be so naïve as not to know that we had hungry neighbors crouching at our borders. I had to seize control if I was to save the castle and its lands. With your brother gone, you were the one thing that stood in my way. I *was* sorry to have to sacrifice you, my dear, but really, it was for the good of the homeland.”

I stared at her, astonished.

She sighed. “You are a true innocent, May Margret. But you are not stupid. Surely you saw the dangers—dangers that continue to this day if my spies tell me right.”

“What do you mean?”

“Your brother wants to marry you off, does he not? To the laird of Dunbar Castle.”

When I did not answer, she said, “Your silence speaks as a voice from the pulpit, my dear. Your brother does indeed have your best interests at heart. But he is sadly deluded. While it is true that Dunbar longs for you, he longs for your lands even more.”

These words twisted at my heart. Was it true? Was the charming Dunbar, who had delighted me so, really after nothing more than our land? Or was my wretched stepmother trying to manipulate me again?

“How can you know these things?” I asked, trying to hide my uneasiness.

“You mean how can I know, trapped down here as I am? That is simple enough. My powers may be greatly reduced, but I still have friends who are loyal to me.”

At these words the grotesque creatures around her rose as one and bowed, then turned their naked backsides to me and slapped at their bottoms.

"Oh, stop that," scolded my stepmother.

The imps sat again. Their smirking faces were maddening.

"These dear friends travel the land for me, gathering information, telling me who is doing what, and who is doing whom."

I felt myself blush at the rudeness.

She stared at me for a moment, then said slowly, "We could work together. I know things, many things. You are teachable, even if you are a bit slow. Perhaps we might still save your family's lands from being swallowed by your suitor."

I stared at her in astonishment. "You want me to work *with* you? After what you did to me? *After what you did to Wynde?"*

"Do not confuse politics with personal loyalty, May Margret! That is a child's game, and you cannot afford to be a child any longer. I did what I thought was best. And it was not I who put those scars on your beloved brother's face."

These words cut deep, and in my anger I wanted to lash out at her. But that would gain me nothing. Worse, I knew there was some truth in what she had been saying—truths which made me even angrier. Why had Father been such a fool? He was old, and tired from the war, I told myself. And I knew that, too, was true. Even so, why had he not done more to protect me? More to protect our lands and home? I loved him, I truly did. But he had let us—let me—down.

"I have, perhaps, said too much," murmured the toad queen. "And I notice you still have not answered my question. Why have you sought me out? Why not let me live down here in peace, now that I am no longer a threat?"

I could not think what to say. Certainly the truth—that I wanted something of her essence so I could return to dragon form—would not do. As if sensing what I was thinking, her imps began to chant, "Tell the truth, tell the truth, tell the truth!"

"Ah," said my stepmother. "I believe there is something you are hiding from me, May Margret. Let me see if I can guess."

I began to feel helpless, as if she were weaving a spell of words around me. Behind her the imps continued their chant: "Tell the truth! Tell the

truth! Tell the truth!”

“Silence!” snapped the toad queen. “How can she tell us *anything* with you going on like that?”

At once, the imps fell silent. Turning her great, bulging eyes on me, my stepmother said softly, “Why not take their advice, May Margret? Go ahead —tell me the truth.”

A compulsion came over me, and the confession of my desire trembled on my lips. Just in time I realized that magic was at work. Placing my hands upon my waist, I felt the power of the rowan twigs. At once the urgent need to tell all faded.

“There were rumors,” I said, working carefully not to tell an outright lie, which I feared my stepmother would somehow catch me in. “Rumors…that you still lived. I wanted to see if you were still a danger to us.”

She looked at me for a long time, then said, “I do not think that was enough to cause you to journey to these depths.”

“I am to be wed.”

“I know that.”

“I am not sure I want to be.”

“I know that.”

“There is a spell that can help me, but I need something from you for it to be cast.”

She stared at me again, blinking. “What is it you need?”

“No more than I would get by wiping a cloth along your back,” I said at last.

She burst out laughing. “And what will you give me in return?”

“What do you want?”

“Take me back to the surface.”

“Can’t you do that on your own?

“There is a… prohibition… on my return. It would be broken were you to carry me.”

This was not exactly what I would have hoped for, but it did answer the question of how I was to get what I needed. All I had to do was wrap the toad queen in the large handkerchief I had brought and carry her to the upper levels. As I was starting to contemplate what I would do with her once we arrived at the surface, she said, “You must swear not to fling me back down the stairs once we are at the top, or harm me in any way.”

I opened my mouth to answer, but before I could speak a word she said sharply, “Understand, May Margret, that a dragon is bound by its word. You may have returned to human form, but that binding clings to you still. So do not think to swear falsely to me now.”

I drew in a deep breath, wondering if she were telling the truth, or simply trying to insure herself against whatever I might do. I decided to respond with a prohibition of my own. “I will swear to this, if you will swear a counter-oath that your imps will remain down here, and no longer bring their mischief to the world above.”

She scowled at me, and I rejoiced inside, sensing she must indeed have planned to summon them. The lovely thing about the counter-oath was that, were she to break it, I would be freed of my own oath as well.

“I swear they will remain here,” she said at last.

“And I swear not to harm you as long as they do,” I replied.

From my bosom, I drew the cloth I had brought with me and began to wrap the queen in it. Remembering Nell’s warning, I took extreme care not to actually touch her. The imps wailed and moaned as I was doing this, until the queen scolded them to silence. When she was securely wrapped, I picked her up. Her body was soft and yielding, almost like holding a large round of bread dough. Suppressing a shudder, I carried her to the little boat, placed her in the front, then returned to the firepit to light my torch. The imps made any number of rude sounds and gestures as I did this, but I ignored them.

As I rowed back over the dark water, my stepmother spoke to me of politics, and the dangers she claimed surrounded us on all sides.

Once across the underground lake, I had to tuck her against my chest so I could hold her with one hand while I carried the rushlight in the other. Fearing to lose my light, I climbed the winding stair quickly, despite the growing pain in my legs, and actually made it to the dungeon before my torch went out. Though I was gasping for breath, and had not expected to fear the darkness, a sudden terror gripped me so tightly that I could scarcely breathe.

“What is the matter?” demanded the queen. “Why have we stopped?”

“I have lost my light.”

“Unwrap me, and I will give you light.”

Carefully, I undid the handkerchief, again making sure not to touch her. The queen muttered a few words, and a glowing ball appeared above her

head. It was a faint, witchy light, an unhealthy green that turned my stomach. Even so, it was better than the darkness.

When the queen saw where we were she uttered a low cry. “Move on,” she urged me. “Let us leave this evil place.”

And so, in short time, we arrived back at the kitchen, where I realized that in my haste to get what I wanted I had not thought carefully about what came next.

“Where do you want me to take you?” I asked my stepmother.

“To your room.”

“I do not want you there. The swamp would be a better place, don’t you think?”

“Don’t be a fool, stepdaughter. Put me in the swamp, and I’ll be back in a day’s time, doing who knows what. But if you place me in your room and take proper care of me, not only can you keep watch on me, but I can advise you on what is to come.”

I was not sure I wanted her advice but did like the idea that if she were in my room I would at least be aware of what she was up to.

#

The next day I went again to see Old Nell, taking with me the cloth in which I had so carefully wrapped my toadly stepmother, as well as the three silver cups that went with the first one I had given her. The old woman greeted me warmly, and seemed pleased—and a bit surprised—that I had actually done this thing. Eying the silver cups, she accepted the handkerchief, then sent me outside to wait as she brewed the potion she had promised.

Late in the afternoon she called me back inside. Fixing me with her one good eye, she handed me a small green bottle and said, “You have but to drink this and the shape you once wore will be yours again. But remember, child—if you do this, you can never again return to human form.”

I gave Nell the cups, which she stroked greedily with her gnarled fingers. Clutching the green bottle with equal greed, I returned to Arlesboro Castle, feeling deep comfort in the knowledge that I could now regain my dragon shape anytime I wanted. I felt, too, a strong hope that the mere fact that this was now in my power would reduce the desire I felt to do so.

#

The weeks that followed were, perhaps, the strangest period of my life—stranger, I think, than even the time I spent as a dragon. For at the toad queen's insistence I prepared a place for her in my wardrobe, a snug spot with a saucer of water and a large, smooth rock encircled by some moss that I moistened daily. Here she could remain unseen by Glenna. At night I would open the door, and give her some wine and bits of meat I had brought from the kitchen. As I could not stand to watch her eat, I would busy myself elsewhere. When she was done she would call to me and I would return to the wardrobe, where she would question me on the day's events, then tell me what she thought of them.

How odd it felt to have my stepmother, who should have been my enemy for what she had done to me, begin to advise me on how to handle what was to come. Yet her words seemed in all ways wise, so much so that I began to wonder if she might truly have the best interests of the country at heart. My confusion was enormous. When my stepmother warned me of the plans of my groom-to-be was she offering me wisdom, or trying to lead me into rash and foolish action that might destroy me? When she explained why Wynde had ordered this marriage, was she speaking with true understanding of the human heart, or simply pouring black fire into my own heart, which was but half-human at best?

Despite the fact that I hated her, a growing part of me wanted to believe her, for I was desperate to think that I had a wise advisor who could help me understand the events moving around me, most especially my upcoming marriage.

At night, after I had closed the doors to the wardrobe, I would lie awake, catechizing my divided heart. Despite my anger at Wynde, I was loyal to him, and could never forget what I owed him. Dunbar was handsome and charming, and the thought of marrying him was deeply attractive to the maiden part of me. But whenever I spoke of this desire to the queen, she seemed alarmed and even angry. "Do not be deceived by looks, May Margret," she would croak. "You, of all people, should know this!"

I did not tell her that underneath both those desires lay another, my aching memory of having been a dragon, and the never-far-away longing to return to that state. But when I did not respond to her explanations of why I should avoid the marriage, she provided one more idea, a devastating one.

“I cannot say what your children might be like.”

So now I was torn, day and night, by desire and fear: Part of me longed to wed and lead a normal life; part of me desired to return to the fiery power of being a dragon; and all of me worried about what might happen if I did indeed wed and become a mother.

I did not sleep much in this time, and often left my bed to stand on the parapets, searching for the answer to my urgent, warring longings. My time grew short, for affairs of state—and the wedding was indeed an affair of state—have a power of their own, moving with the strength of the tides themselves.

And so at last the day of the wedding came. Despite my stepmother’s warnings, I was prepared to let it go on. At least, most of my heart was ready to do so. Most, but not all. Which was, I suppose, not fair to Dunbar.

That morning I dressed in a gown of ruby red, which was supposed to stand for fertility. Though that idea frightened me—what *would* my children be like?—it also spoke to me of the fire that raged within. My red hair was braided and coiled atop my head. Around my neck hung a ruby pendant. And, of course, around my waist, beneath my gown, I wore the girdle of rowan twigs.

Glenna accompanied me to the chapel as my maid of honor. But despite our long friendship, and my deep trust in my lady-in-waiting, she did not know what was in the basket of flowers that I had asked her to carry.

#

The chapel was on the castle grounds, a simple stone building that, even so, held sacred objects of great beauty. Gathered inside were guests from neighboring kingdoms. In the back stood many of our most trusted servants. To my surprise, Old Nell was among them.

At the front of the chapel stood the round little priest who had served our family since I was a child. Before him waited my brother, tall and straight, and still fine and fair to my eyes, despite his scars. Near to Wynde was my groom, the sight of his handsome face and broad shoulders filling my heart with unexpected desire.

Quivering with fear and longing, I took my place and the ceremony began. All went well until the priest asked the question, “Does any man here have reason why these two should not be joined?” The question was

meant to let any legal objection—such as an unpaid dowry, or proof that I was not a virgin—be brought forward, and I expected no challenge. So I was astonished when Old Nell stepped from her place and said, “There will be no wedding today.”

The desire I had felt in my veins was replaced by a coldness as icy as the spring streams when the snow melts.

As the chapel erupted in shouts, Nell limped down the aisle.

“What is this?” asked the priest, flustered and turning red.

Nell pulled back her scraggly gray hair, binding it with a quick twist. Now that it no longer hung over her face, her features seemed different to me. She yanked at the tattered cloak she had been wearing, ripping it open and throwing it aside.

Beneath she wore the vestments of a man.

Wynde stood as if frozen. I heard the sound of swords being drawn, but as I scanned the chapel, I saw that they were the swords of our guests, who outnumbered our own men greatly.

Nell limped to where I stood. “There will be no wedding for you today, May Margret. Today, or ever.” Her voice was deeper now, and came out in a kind of snarl.

“Who are you?” I whispered. “Why are you doing this to me?”

“He is my father,” said William, stepping from the group of servants gathered at the back of the chapel. “My father, Lord MacRae, a loyal subject of your father who, nevertheless, was tortured mercilessly in the dungeon beneath Arlesboro Castle.”

Lord MacRae grabbed my chin. He twisted himself a bit, then spoke bitterly in Old Nell’s voice. “I was not woman born, May Margret. But never was I man again after what happened to me in your father’s loving care.” He turned and spat upon the floor, then roared in his own voice, “Look at me, girl, and you too, Wynde. See what your father’s evil has wrought. I was a loyal subject. But your father—”

The contempt in his voice when he said “your father” made me ill.

“Your father, believing false reports, thought me a spy, and so had me taken to the dungeon to be tortured. That black hellhole was where I lost this eye.” Here Lord MacRae put his face near mine and pulled down at his cheek, forcing me to stare into the empty socket. “It was where I lost my teeth,” he continued, pulling down his lower lip to reveal his empty gums.

“It was where I received the wounds that, left untreated, festered until they cost me my leg.”

At these last words, William rushed forward. Leaning against his son, Lord MacRae continued, “And it was there, screaming for mercy, that I lost my manhood. There, in the dungeon below your home, I suffered pain beyond imagining, for a crime I had not committed.”

My shame already great, increased tenfold at his next words.

“My shrieks of pain, my cries for mercy, went unheard.”

Were those his cries that Wynde and I had heard when we crept down the dungeon stairs? His, or those of some other innocent, it made no difference. We never asked. We never told. We never spoke of what we had seen.

“I finally escaped with the help of a friend, a decent man who knew evil when he saw it, and stepped in to stop it,” continued Lord MacRae. “And as I lay in a hut in the wildwood, recovering, I vowed I would see an end to this bloodline and an end to this reign.”

“We thought we had accomplished this when I wed your father and turned you to a dragon,” said a voice from the basket that Glenna carried.

With a cry of shock my lady-in-waiting dropped the basket. The flowers scattered and out rolled the little green bottle that I kept always near, as proof to myself I could return to dragon form if needed.

Out, too, hopped my stepmother. “Though we would have preferred Wynde to stay abroad, it was not a problem that he returned,” she continued. “For I had built it into the spell that the heat of your breath would forever unman him.”

A brutal cry of loss twisted from Wynde’s lips, even as Lord MacRae said with bitter satisfaction, “You unmanned him yourself, May Margret, just as your father unmanned me.”

“Our father could not have not known what was happening in that dungeon,” said Wynde, speaking at last.

MacRae turned to him. Scorn dripping from his words, he said, “A man cannot escape by pretending not to know what is done in his name, Wynde. Your father knew, and if he did not know his shame is just as great, for it was his duty to know. And it was not just me, boy. Dozens of others were chained in that dungeon during the endless days and nights I was held there, dozens of others were tormented with inhuman cruelty. I know. I saw. I heard. I am the living witness.”

Murmurs from around the chapel told me that most of the men here had some connection to those dozens of others. A brother, perhaps. An uncle. A father. A son.

"All would have been finished and done if you had not arranged for this marriage," said the toad queen. "We would simply have let the line die out. That is all we want—for this heritage of evil to disappear from the face of the earth forever."

"What is your place in this?" I cried.

"Why, I am Lord MacRae's daughter. Despite the glamour I wore when I wed your father—a girl can learn a lot of magic in ten years if she has a mind to—I thought you would have realized that much by now. I do appreciate you fetching me from the depths, May Margret. Though William opened the door for me to descend, the magic was such that you alone could bring me back."

Lord MacRae laughed. "My son made a good messenger, did he not, carrying word from me to his sister and back again?"

My fury was mounting, the fire in my blood growing. "Do something," I hissed to Dunbar.

But my groom-to-be was staring at me with horror. Shaking his head, he took a step away.

"Coward!" I cried. With a scream of rage, I flung myself to the floor and grabbed the green bottle.

I expected Lord MacRae or the toad queen to order William to stop me. But they remained silent. As the assembled guests watched I fumbled with the cork. When I could not pry it loose I gripped it with my teeth and yanked.

The cork came free.

Tipping back my head, I upended the bottle and swallowed the potion, ready at last for the fire to return.

Nothing happened.

I gasped in fury and astonishment. All this time I had kept the potion close, thinking it would let me return to dragonhood. But it had been a lie, a cheat. My rage now grew beyond all bounds, multiplied by the deep, burning shame I felt for what our father had done during the days of the war, things that no man should ever do.

The toad queen laughed. "Did you really think we would put such power back in your hands once you knew the truth, May Margret? That

potion was never meant to work."

That laugh was her mistake. More enraged than ever, I dashed the bottle against the floor, where it shattered into glittering shards.

Then I dove for her.

"No!" cried MacRae.

He was too late. "Tell me!" I screamed, grabbing my stepmother's soft, bloated body and lifting her from the floor. "Tell me! There is a way for me to turn back, I know there is!"

But my stepmother did not need to tell me anything. The instant that I grabbed her I felt my body try to twist and change, felt fire tickle weakly at my veins, felt power beat fruitlessly against the doors of my heart.

Now I understood why Lord MacRae, disguised as Old Nell, had impressed upon me that I must never touch my stepmother. That connection itself was the key and the secret to my return to dragon shape. But something was wrong; something was blocking the magic.

Suddenly, I knew what it was. Screeching with pain and triumph, I dropped my stepmother. Grabbing at my bodice, I ripped open the scarlet dress, then wrenched the belt of rowan twigs from about my waist and flung it aside.

Now the magic could flow freely, and in that moment the change began for real. In the same instant my stepmother, still sprawled on the stone floor, began to writhe and grow, crying out with pain equal to mine as her body stretched back to its human form.

Screams filled the chapel as people scattered, trying to escape. They fled not merely in fear of me but because the growing, writhing coils of my returning dragonhood were filling the space, and there was little room for them. Wood screeched as my growing body slid pews across the floor. Glass shattered as my writhing tail struck window after window.

I did not care. The fire and the pain were on me and I was changing, changing.

My stepmother scrambled away, got to her feet, ran. I lunged for her, grasped her between my jaws… and stopped.

Why? Why did I stop, when I could have swallowed her in an instant? Was it the promise I had made when we were underground, the promise not to harm her? The promise that bound me by my word as a dragon?

Possibly.

But I prefer to think it was the moment of dragon clarity I had, the sure knowledge that if I killed her it would not be the end, but just another chapter. The vengeance, the war, the anger, the death, they would all go on.

Opening wide my great mouth, I dropped her naked body to the floor.

She gazed up at me. To my astonishment, tears filled her eyes. “It was not you we wanted to punish, May Margret,” she said. “This was always about your father.”

I tipped my head back and roared, a burst of flame so powerful it sundered the slate roof. As the stones clattered down around us I stretched my powerful body over that of my stepmother to shield her. When the stonefall was over and she was safe, I burst through what was left of the roof, sending it sailing in all directions as I took to the sky.

#

I spend my days on the Spindlestone now, where I think often on a passage the fat priest in the little chapel used to cite to us: “The sins of the fathers shall be visited upon the sons.”

I always hated those lines, thinking it deeply unfair that God would punish children for the actions of their parents. But now, finally, I think I understand. The verse does not speak of what God will do, but rather of how the world works. For when you do evil, when you create pain, at the same time you create an enemy. And not just one enemy; you make an enemy of all those who loved the one to whom you gave the pain.

Our father did evil, and Wynde and I suffered for it.

But perhaps it can end here. My stepmother, having healed my brother’s face, now acts as his advisor. Though Wynde will remain childless, young William has been declared the heir. So there will be no fight when Wynde has passed on.

As for me?

Well, I am the guardian of my country.

I watch the shores.

I watch the hills and forests.

I protect us from invasion.

But that is the least of what I do. For I also listen. I listen to the people who bring me news. I listen to what is happening.

That is the reason I stay here, wound round the Spindlestone, staring out to sea, but now and then turning my head to look behind, at the land I love.

I am the guardian of my country.

And we will do no more evil while I yet live.